



An Introduction to the Study of the Acts of the Apostles

James M. Stifler

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From inside the books:

Jesus Christ is not only the central figure in history, he is its source. Without him the course of events from the first century to the present time cannot be explained. Judea has given the world the men, the literature and the institutions which have made it.

The book of the Acts is a very brief history. It covers only about thirty years. But it is doubted whether any other thirty years in all the world's centuries have seen such marvelous social and religious changes—changes, too, accomplished without war and without any serious shedding of blood. Every hope, every sentiment of patriotism and religion bound the Jew to the law of Moses. That law was never more scrupulously observed than in this very period when it lost its divisive power. It had been a wall between Israel and the Gentiles. The latter lay in the soddenness of their sin, despising the descendants of Abraham, and being themselves heartily despised in turn. Nothing but the power and presence of Jesus can account for the coming together of these two diverse elements on the common level of the church.

When Jesus Christ ascended to heaven he left no church behind. He left no commands for organizing a church. In his instructions there was nothing directly involving the idea of an assemblage of believers from all nationalities, with no common bond but fraternal love, and no ruler but himself. To be sure he twice mentioned a church, but there was nothing but the mention. His hearers could not understand its significance. They were far from understanding much that he taught. Any one of the twelve who might sit down to reflect on his moral obligations after the cloud had received Jesus out of sight, would find that these were just two: first, he must himself be a true, holy man, loyal to Jesus, and, secondly, he must preach the gospel. The heavenly knowledge which Jesus' ministry imparted went far beyond mere duties. That knowledge gave comfort, insight, life, but not the idea of a church. Neither before his ascension nor after it did Jesus teach the disciples to organize a church. Their one public duty was to bear witness to his resurrection. He made the church himself. It is his own creation. And the book before us shows the series of acts by which the church was formed and brought to its perfection.

The book of Acts naturally falls into a number of concentric sections like the circles that mark the yearly growth of a tree. Each new one includes all that went before it. These sections mark the successive stages of development in the church from the beginning to the end. A careful tracing out of these is necessary to a proper understanding of the whole.

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